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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000283

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR U/S GROSSMAN AND DAS ROMANOWSKI
DEPT FOR NEA/FO PDAS LAROCCO AND DAS DIBBLE, NEA/PI,
NEA/ARP, AND DRL/PHD
CAIRO ALSO FOR STEVE BONDY

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY IS HARD WORK ... EVEN IN BAHRAIN

REF: A. MANAMA 268

[B](#). MANAMA 237
[C](#). MANAMA 200

Classified By: CDA Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4(b)(d).

SUMMARY

1.(C) A democratically inexperienced GOB is learning just how messy democracy can be. Besides dealing with the boycotting opposition, both elected and appointed parliamentarians are challenging the government over alleged scandals and failures. Sunni Islamists are asserting themselves in directions that are beginning to cause discomfort among Bahrain's ruling elite. At least one senior official may be contemplating resignation because he doesn't enjoy public criticism. On the other hand, top business leaders are beginning to criticize publicly some Islamist initiatives that business leaders think could harm business prospects. Manama is a small place, and its crowded political circuits are starting to get hot. Overall, the GOB's reaction appears to be one of slowing the pace of political reform. This is having an impact on MEPI programs, requiring the Embassy to spend much more time than anticipated massaging the system to obtain positive program outcomes. END SUMMARY

GOB JEKYL OR HYDE ... WHICH ONE RULES TODAY?

2.(C) Throughout the last three years of reforms, the GOB has often seemed to have a split personality. The King has implemented a new constitution that provides some elements of democracy to the Bahraini people. The Royal Court sponsors NDI's work in Bahrain and the King is driving force behind Bahrain's negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. The King has repeatedly stated that he welcomes proposals to amend the new constitution through the system detailed therein. The government usually has handled pressures from the boycotting opposition with tact and reserve. The King has restrained his security forces, releasing and, when necessary, pardoning youths arrested for participating in violent demonstrations.

3.(C) On the other hand, the Government has shown in recent months a tendency to regress to pre-reform behavior. The government has intimidated meeting hall owners into canceling scheduled public political events. In November, the GOB quickly moved to shut down the political satire "Laysh Abu al Aysh" (but ultimately failed as the opposition quickly erected an outdoor theater on a vacant lot). Two weeks ago, it obstructed the holding a constitutional conference as reported ref B. As we noted in this year's human rights report, press censorship and journalist self-censorship remain constant problems.

PARLIAMENT, SUNNI ISLAMISTS ALSO CHALLENGE THE GOVERNMENT

4.(C) While trying to muzzle those who boycott the existing political system, the government is also grappling with the consequences of the political reforms to date. The GOSI/Pension Fund investigation could very well lead to parliament's removal of a minister through a vote of no-confidence (ref C), and members who successfully uncovered the mismanagement of the pension funds have announced new investigations of corruption and mismanagement. Meanwhile, Sunni Islamist deputies are spearheading a new effort to question the Information Minister about the production in Bahrain of a reality TV show in which six young unmarried Arab men are living in the same house with six unmarried young Arab women (septel). Even the appointed upper house of Parliament, the Shura Council, is getting into the act. It trashed the government's draft press law in favor of a more liberal version prepared by one of the Council's members.

5.(C) Government officials, top business leaders, and ruling family members are beginning to complain that the GOB may have stepped into a real mess with political reform, and some are even blaming the USG. A top MFA official and well-connected member of the ruling family told Staffdel Clark on February 14 that he deeply resented Sunni Islamist

activities to limit social freedoms saying there was no way he would allow religious conservatives to dictate his wife's choice of apparel. A leading restaurateur and tourism promoter bitterly complained to P/E Chief about government constantly conceding to Islamist demands to restrict alcohol sales. Meanwhile a top Finance Ministry official told Charge that the Finance Minister may resign soon because of the public criticism he has endured over the Pension Fund scandal. According to our contact, the minister just doesn't want to deal with personal public criticism. Vandals are now painting barbs on the walls of the minister's (luxurious) villa, this exasperated source exclaimed.

REFORM PACE SLOWING?

6.(C) We are seeing signs that the GOB is rethinking the pace at which it will implement reform. Last Spring, PAS began actively recruiting a U.S. political scientist Fulbrighter to help the University of Bahrain found a new political science faculty and program. When we succeeded and notified the university, we discovered that a political science program is no longer in the university's near term plans. It took extensive work to obtain university approval to seat the Fulbrighter in the business school where he's going to teach a course on globalization only. Similarly, when PAO recently previewed to our main reform-minded education ministry interlocutor new MEPI programs, he told her point blank that Bahrain is not ready for civic education in the schools. He cautioned Bahrain could not move too fast.

7.(C) Meanwhile, both MEPI-funded political program managers have reported to us that their GoB contacts are stressing the need to go slowly and carefully. As noted ref A, the Justice Minister wants to "low-profile" the ABA technical assistance program because he has discovered opposition from Sunni Islamists within the ministry to American technical assistance to change the judicial system. He wants to move forward, but not at the risk of a flank counterattack. Concurrently, the influential Minister of the Royal Court, Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, emphatically told NDI in January not to include a representative of the boycotting Shi'a opposition party al-Wefaq in NDI's April Muslim democracies conference in Istanbul. The NDI rep has also said that Shaikh Khaled would prefer that NDI made developing the democratic skills of the government and National Assembly NDI's top priority over training opposition political activists.

COMMENT

8.(C) The GOB is struggling at multiple levels to manage political reform while maintaining the political stability it needs to attract investment that creates jobs. On one side, the boycotting opposition's desire for more radical political change and its refusal to participate challenge the new system's legitimacy. On the other side, the new political system has produced an increasingly aggressive parliament intent on proving its relevance (and that of the new system) to the Bahraini people by bringing down a minister and pushing for more reform. The Sunni Islamist bloc in the parliament is asserting itself in directions that are beginning to create discomfort among Bahrain's elite. The GOB appears to be responding by slowing the pace of, but not altering its commitment to, reform. The GOB, we sense, wants time to find solutions. As we inject MEPI programs into this mix, the GOB is responding more cautiously, and the Embassy must spend increasing amounts of time to work with MEPI contractors and the GOB to achieve positive program outcomes.

END COMMENT.

FORD